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Tear That Embassy Down

Grim news on the *glasnost* front. It seems that one meaning of *glasnost* (openness) is open access for Soviet spies to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. And this episode has knocked Reason from her throne in the White House. Questions of embassy architecture do not bring out Ronald Reagan's best.

When a criminally negligent approach to the construction of security barriers made the U.S. Embassy in Beirut vulnerable to a devastating bomb attack, the president said: Shucks, you know how hard it is to get carpenters to step lively when you want your kitchen fixed. Now he says that canceling Secretary George Shultz's trip to Moscow, merely—merely—because the embassy has become a plaything for Soviet intelligence operatives, would be allowing the Soviet Union to “run us out of town.”

Get a blackboard the size of Montana and a piece of chalk the size of Connecticut and diagram Reagan's reasoning: unless we ignore the humiliation of being effectively evicted from our embassy, we will not seem manly.

The State Department, which sometimes seems to be a Bermuda Triangle into which national resolve disappears without a trace, has been passive in the face of the Soviet assault on the U.S. Embassy. And while the assault on the old and the new U.S. Embassy was under way, the Soviets were allowed to build a new embassy on a Washington hill perfectly suited for electronic espionage.

The new U.S. embassy structure in Moscow is a large broadcasting studio for the benefit of Soviet intelligence. It is composed of modules built by Soviet labor and, evidently, loving care over a 15-year period. It should be razed, and the Soviet Union, which ruined it with electronic penetration devices, should pay for it—\$191 million. Pending that payment, their Washington Embassy should be reduced to a skeleton staff.

That will not happen because the United States refuses to learn the lesson that The Economist of London put succinctly: “The folly of 1970s détente was the belief that Western pliancy would help Soviet reformers. It doesn't. It helps Soviet opportunists.”

The spirit of détente produced a new Soviet embassy on a Washington hill and a shell of a U.S. Embassy in a trough in Moscow. The spirit of détente is a spirit of unreciprocated U.S. concessions and unanswered Soviet aggressions. In that spirit the secretary of state is going to Moscow in the middle of this scandal, thereby communicating the message that nothing can interfere with our desire for business as usual and for an arms control agreement that the Soviet Union will treat as it treats U.S. embassies.

The Reagan administration's posture is that of the character in an Alan Bennett play: “I'm not happy. But I'm not unhappy about it.” Which means: détente is back and standing tall. The idea of détente is the cockroach of American intellectual life—an idea so hardshelled and impervious to conditions that one wonders if it cannot be destroyed other than by nuclear winter, if that.

The idea that reforms, mellowing liberalization, democratization, peaceful coexistence—détente—is just around the corner received particularly memorable expression 43 years ago. In July 1944, writing with characteristic confidence, Walter Lippmann said in a letter to a friend that after the war the Soviet Union would certainly move far toward democracy:

“Why else do you suppose they keep talking about democracy? They don't have to talk about it but they do, and they can't be such fools as to talk about democracy in Poland and Italy and elsewhere unless they intend to have a good deal of it at home.”

Unless they count on foolish people in the West to be mesmerized by their talk. Today a Lippmannesque non sequitur is heard: Gorbachev talks about democracy so he must intend democracy.

But listen to Galina Vishnevskaya, formerly a leading soprano with the Bolshoi opera. She and her husband, cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, were deprived of their Soviet citizenship in 1978. In an interview in *Encounter* magazine, she speaks of the difficulty Westerners have in making “the imaginative leap to understand what goes on under Soviet rule.” What goes on is the sour spring from which flows Soviet behavior, a steady inculcation of hatred of the West. She says:

“If a shared Christianity was not enough to stop monarchs from doing very unchristian things to one another through the centuries, we can imagine—indeed we can see—what the principle of hatred, elevated to the governing creed of one of the world's most powerful countries, will do to the lives of all of us.”

The hatred is compounded with the contempt we earn by our “fawning over half-measures” (The Economist's words) of Gorbachev reforms and our halfhearted responses to episodes like the assaults on our embassies.